

# A Review of Stephen K. Levine's *Philosophy of Expressive Arts Therapy: Poiesis and the Therapeutic Imagination*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019

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Levine's *Philosophy of Expressive Arts Therapy* elaborates upon his definition of *poiesis* and philosophical contribution to the Expressive Art Therapy. He also uses personal anecdotes and poetry to embody *poiesis* and Expressive Art methods throughout the writing process. Levine distinguishes phenomenological philosophy as the underpinning and *poiesis* as an applied approach within the emerging field of Expressive Art Therapy. Each chapter distinctly addresses Expressive Art Therapy and *poiesis*, as well as the philosophical distinctions of Expressive Art Therapy approaches from other therapeutic methods. Each part is a stand alone musing, with the only through-line being connected by Levine's applied concept of *Poiesis*.

Expressive Art Therapy (EXA) is situated at the juncture of multiple art forms (drama, movement, music, visual art, etc.). This multi-arts approach encourages creativity and play for individuals and communities as they navigate challenges and opportunities through a resource-oriented approach. Levine's own personal and professional insights are interwoven through prose, poetry and philosophical frameworks. He emphasizes aesthetics and embodiment through the term *poiesis*, which is defined and contextualized throughout each chapter. In the forward, it is noted by Catherine Hyland Moon (a noted EXA scholar and therapist) that Levine believes "*poiesis* is the capacity to engage creatively with what we are given in life and to shape it anew, can be undertaken collectively, not just individually" (p.13). Levine states art-making is not a form of self-expression. Art-making in the expressive art context is not about self-expression but the making, coming into form. The self is the same: what is coming into form for us to make meaning and impact within the liminal chaos? Levine argues that art is relational. EXA is a particularly relational process whereby the therapist is witnessing and guiding the art-making process for a client or community.

Levine is a pioneer in the field of Expressive Art Therapy who has written extensively about the application of the concept of *poiesis* – the art of 'making' as a response to the world. Previous publications include: *Poiesis: The Language of Psychology and the Speech of the Soul* (1997) and *Trauma, Tragedy, Therapy: The Arts and Human Suffering* (2009). He has also co-edited, with Ellen G. Levine, *Foundations of Expressive Arts Therapy: Theoretical and Clinical Perspectives* (1999), *Art in Action: Expressive Arts*

*Therapy and Social Change* (2011), *New Developments in Expressive Arts Therapy: The Play of Poiesis* (2017), and editor of *POIESIS: A Journal of the Arts and Communication*. His breadth of research and praxis is prolific within EXA graduate training programs, and his scholarly writings offer robust philosophical foundations for this evolving field. Arguably, Levine has single-handedly built the EXA philosophical framework, connecting the approach and theories to philosophy.

Levine applies a philosophical phenomenological framework for EXA and situates the interdisciplinary field in the philosophy of Derrida, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. *Philosophy of Expressive Art Therapy: Poiesis and the Therapeutic Imagination* lightly touches, surveying Chinese philosophies, improvisational techniques in music and performance, aesthetics and aesthetic responsibility, trauma, identity politics, embodiment, archetypal imagery, but always bringing it back to poesis.

The book consists of five distinct parts: Part I – *Poiesis, Therapy And The Arts*, Part II – *Poiesis: From Phenomenology To Imagination*, Part III – *The Way Of Poiesis: A Chinese Perspective*, Part IV – *Poiesis, Improvisation, Identity and Part V: Last Words: When All Is Said And Done*.

In the introductory chapter, Levine recounts his childhood growing up in Brooklyn, New York during World War II as a Jewish boy, developing a love of theatre and his early academic career beginning in philosophy. He became politically active and completed his graduate studies at the New School for Social Research in 1962. There, he was taught by exiled protégé's of Husserl and Heidegger. This gave him a philosophical background that he wove into his experiences in theatre, becoming a therapist and creating an Expressive Art Therapy Training School in Toronto in 1991. Levine connects Heidegger's notion of being-in-world through doing to make a world and meaning with the notion of transitional experience (Winnicott, 1971) and liminality (Turner, 1969) thus expanding the definition of *poiesis* for the Expressive Art context (Levine, 2019, p. 32).

In Part 1, Levine weaves together Heideggerian theories of 'letting-go' and 'being-with' in relation to psychologist Winnicott's unintegrated and transitional objects and play. Levine shifts the Greek concept of *poiesis* into a wider understanding of human existence. Whereas *poiesis* has, historically, been understood as that of making or calling into being, in this book, Levine reframes it to include aesthetic forms of meaning-making are key to understanding life and human existence. He states that play isn't merely enough; but crystallizing the imagination into form allows for a deep engagement with meaning-making. Levine outlines how the framework of an art-making session can reshape fragmentation and chaos into creative forms of agency.

In Part 2, Levine explores *poiesis* through the senses and in dialogue with James Hillman's archetypal imagery. Hillman studied with Jung and founded archetypal psychology focusing on myth, image, imagination and dream work. Images are read and seen as an avenue to a greater insight of self. For Hillman, the archetypal images can lead us to "soul-making" (p. 65). Essential to EXA's methods is moving beyond the imaginal realm and connecting to the concrete reality the art piece is created in. What does the art piece and the process of art-making teach us about our current life circumstances? EXA theory differs in facilitating the client in a phenomenological approach, it is an embodied

experience of art-making and reflection. In the art-making process, clients are facilitated to focus on the art-making experience, creating a sensitivity to presence and staying in the moment as opposed to prescriptive, preformed ideas of what to create. The client then is guided to reflect upon the art-making process and product not from a place of interpretation of psychological theories to connect it to feelings or past experiences but rather what did they notice within the art creation process. Clients then make their own meanings, outside of archetypal ideas or interpreting feelings. For example, if a client said they were sad, an EXA therapist might ask what sadness looks like, tastes like, moves like. This moves it away from psychological interpretations to the concrete, embodied and sensorial, reality. In Chapter 6 and 7, Levine dialogues with Derrida's *Animal that I am*; and Derrida's *Phenomena and Speech* to explore embodiment, voice and language. Part 2 has strength in Levine connecting *poiesis* to embodiment and sensorial understanding through sight (image), being in one's body in relationship to consciousness, and applies these insights to voice work and song composition. He combines archetypal references with phenomenological insights to illustrate how images, voice and song can build constructive bridges to real life situations.

In Part 3: Levine connects with classical Chinese thought, Taoism, wu-wei, and ideas regarding aesthetics and art's purpose during the classical period, as a counterpoint to Western ideas of aesthetics and the concept of surrender. These tie in excellently with the Expressive Arts and the Heideggerian concept of *Gelassenheit*; 'letting-be' or 'releasement' to the acceptance of being here and now, experiencing things in the world (Levine, 2009). In expressive art philosophy, Levine has extrapolated this is surrendering to the art creation process, to be surprised by the creation process, uncertain of what all the steps of art creation will be, just going one step at a time into discovery. It's not a passive act, but accepting the world or art as it is emerging. Levine distinguishes aesthetics in Chinese thought with Western paradigms, and emphasizes the absence of predetermined concepts for beauty. He emphasizes the post-modern democratization of beauty in the lineage of Chinese philosophy. Levine makes a key connection to the Expressive Art field, by stating client's artwork "does not aim at beauty but at life. It is often chaotic and unfinished" (p. 88).

Part 4 highlights personal impressions from Levine's lived experiences. The first two chapters discuss his experiences in performance via an improvisational lecture based upon John Cage's improvisational techniques. He reflects on his own role as an artist and expressive art therapist and frameworks that exist for an artist to be able to drop into improvisation safely. Free play exists in a context. The last chapter (12) illuminates the inextricable connections between *poiesis* and the creation of individual and/or communal identity. Levine deposits hope that *poiesis* within individuals and communities allows for openness to transcend the current binaries and pains within our societal structures and personal limitations.

Part 5 consists of two chapters. Levine speaks to trauma and connects to Heidegger's concept of *dasein*, "to-be-there". In previous books, Levine grounds *dasein*, as being-in-the-world and that we are aware of our own existence in the world, both as relational, with others, and in our relationship with mortality, or being-towards-death (Levine, 2005; Levine, 1999). In *Philosophy of Expressive Arts Therapy*, Levine further extrapolates the concept of *Dasein*, asserting that "we truly exist when we create" (p. 138). Levine ties

this concept back into therapy, noting the healing possibilities of staying in the present moment creating something new and not being connected to our past selves. Expressive Art methods encourage clients to play again and discover ways to live with our inherent vulnerability thus building resiliency. Chapter 14 is an interview with one of the Expressive Art founders, Paulo Knill. Through conversation, Levine spells out his evolution with the concept of *poiesis*: connecting the Heideggerian concept with psychotherapy. *Poiesis* in the Heideggerian definition was used in reference art. Early expressive art therapy saw art as a vehicle of self expression. Levine used his philosophical background to elevate expressive art therapy by incorporating phenomenological understandings. “The art-work is not the self ... as my thinking developed in the field, I began to understand the complex nature of the role of *poiesis* in human experience in general, not only the arts” (p. 146).

In this section, Levine also addresses Heidegger’s connection with the NAZI party and his relationship to this fact as a Jew. Levine acknowledges how people can be contradictory in their views. He notes the peculiarity of Heidegger’s alignment with fascism while also writing extensively about surrendering to the current moment, to letting go to what is yet fascism is bending things to your will, having power over. For Levine, Heidegger believing in fascistic, damaging views does not take away from his contributions to philosophy or his sensitivity around art and poetry: “if we judged people’s works by who they are, then we would have to say that a good person produces good work and a bad person produces bad work. That’s obviously not true. It would totally be against the point of view of Expressive Art Therapy” (p. 154). People are nuanced: creating brilliant works of art while contributing to acts of oppression and violence.

The two EXA pioneers, Levine and Knill, talk about the grounding philosophies and address aesthetic biases in the field: as a facilitator to be attracted to light and beautiful aesthetics without skill, to be obsessed with self-expression. For example, flowers and flowing music without integrating punk rock or skulls. Levine and Knill talk about the phenomenological underpinnings – that the obsession with self-expression and low skill is pulling away from the essential ingredients of staying in the artwork, in the present moment to what is emerging no matter it’s aesthetic. The expressive art-making experience is relational, as is life and art. We live in “resonance” (p. 155). Resonance here is using musical concept as a metaphor for life – to live in harmony yet difference with others.

In the *Philosophy of Expressive Arts Therapy*, Levine refines his ground-breaking yet foundational philosophies, and further defines Expressive Arts practice. Throughout his written works, he comes circles back to the same philosophical concept of *poiesis* but with different angles. In his 1999 book, *Foundations of Expressive Art Therapy* he talks about it in relation to post-modern thought, in his 2009 book, *Trauma, Tragedy, Therapy: The Arts and Human Suffering* and in the seminal philosophical chapter in *Principles and Practice of Expressive Arts Therapy: toward a therapeutic aesthetics*. In each chapter and book, Levine incorporates philosophical concepts but always circles back to his own interpretations and extrapolations specific to the emerging field of Expressive Art Therapy. Levine's interpretation of Heidegger's 'The Origin of the Work of Art', forms as basis for EXA philosophy. In applied terms, Levine states that Heidegger claims "art as a

primordial way in which truth becomes manifest" (p. 29). Levine notes art can then allow meaning-making for the human experience and connects this Heideggerian view of art and meaning-making to the Greek concept of *Poiesis*. It is not about will and mastering the world to do as you want it to, a pre-conceived notion as it is to accepting what is occurring in the moment. *Poiesis*, the act of making, is required to be human. To move through the world, to make sense and meaning of what is occurring. To do, and also to receive what is being just occurring around, to be resilient and adaptable. Not everything can be shaped, sometimes one must surrender. For *Philosophy of Expressive Arts Therapy: Poiesis and the Therapeutic Imagination*, it's Levine's most personal account and the most refined of his interpretations yet. Yet, it's also general, surveying various connections in a way that makes other accounts more in-depth an applicable. *Trauma, Tragedy, Therapy (2009)* encapsulates the philosophical concept of poiesis in a more in-depth way. The book explores art-making giving the ability to make chaos into form, to make sense of the horrible acts of humanity. Through creation, those traumatized can be empowered to create a new world, embodied and in the concrete reality of the senses. The art, and life then, is not about mastery and bending the world to our will, but recognizing new possibilities in our already current realities. Comparatively, *Philosophy of Expressive Arts Therapy* is more anecdotal, more memoir.

He has clear respect for philosophical phenomenology and applies those concepts directly to the Expressive Art practices, but he is not *doing* phenomenology. He is building upon his legacy within the EXA field, further contributing to applying phenomenological concepts to a therapeutic field, adding a much-needed academic framework grounded in established canons of continental philosophy. But while, Levine engages well-recognized phenomenological philosophers, he doesn't engage contemporary scholars who are similarly seeking phenomenology as application, such as van Manen, Giorgi or any other contemporary phenomenologist. Such an engagement could further heighten EXA in both philosophical underpinnings and in practice. It leaves a curiosity if this is a conscious choice. Levine tracing back the philosophical lineage from Derrida, Levinas, Heidegger, Plato, etc. is looking into the past, instead of incorporating contemporaries, or emerging futures. Levine also is a pioneer in Expressive Arts, prolifically and solely writing Expressive Art based philosophy. He has no contemporaries that have the philosophical experience and outlet. One can only predict that Levine has tied to classic philosophers as that is what he knows, instead of branching into other approaches or interdisciplinary approaches to phenomenological research or understanding.

In its form, the biography and poetry show a personal reflectiveness of his place within the EXA literature as a scholar practitioner. He generously offers insights into his own relationship to aging, a Parkinson's diagnosis and a severe bike accident. The blend of personal memoir with accessible theory leads to an accessible and enjoyable read. Through this active, conscious creating, Levine hopes that new possibilities and new truths can be uncovered, and the possibility for play and newness is always there. There is a concern that Levine using eastern philosophies would be culturally appropriative, or contributing to orientalism, he does not dip into either of these faux pas. He cites his information and mentions many times providing a counterpoint to enrich the Expressive Art philosophy to be less western biased. This understanding will be key as Expressive Art expands beyond it's European and American origins. In the last fifteen years, EXA centres have emerged in Russia, Hong Kong and India. As the new generation of EXA

practitioners and scholars emerges, Levine has created an invitation to incorporating differing cultural understandings of art-making and aesthetics.

Overall, *Philosophy of Expressive Arts Therapy* is impressionist in style with each chapter offering digestible morsels for a range of complex ideas. And like good art and good phenomenological texts, on further inspection, there is great depth and wisdom in its simplicity. At first read, the book washes over the reader; yet on going as deep and revealing more wisdom or meaning as you allow it. Unlike traditional phenomenological texts, however, the *Philosophy of Expressive Arts Therapy* remains a disconnected montage of concepts that can be unclear to readers as to how it all fits together. It is, at times, disjointedly personal; yet also charming for that reason. Levine thus achieves his goal of keeping an unintegrated quality and fragmented. Like a good phenomenological expressive art session *Philosophy of Expressive Arts Therapy* asks you to stay in the flow and make meaning from what is occurring. Levine's *poiesis* thrives in the necessary chaos and unknowns. Readers who are looking for a pleasant read with inter-disciplinary approaches will like this book. It contains story, poetry and philosophy. It's reflective. It's based in Expressive Art philosophy and practice; however, would also provide inside to artists of all kinds, art-based therapists and philosophers who are interested in different applications of phenomenological understandings.

Levine's writing style is simple and approachable yet impactful. Levine makes the EXA connections to phenomenological philosophy accessible and applicable to both novices and EXA experts alike. Levine achieves his goal of creating a personable poietic book to explore the relevance of phenomenological understanding to a therapeutic art form and *poiesis*. The large founding figures of EXA are passing away, with no clear direction of predecessors to build upon the tradition Levine has founded. The next generation of Expressive Art based philosophers is unclear and allows for a fitting place of uncertainty and new growth.

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